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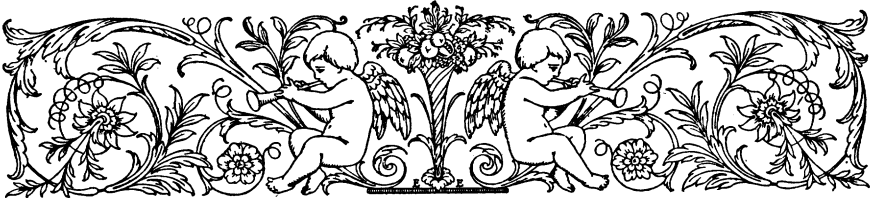
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## NOISES, SMELLS AND COLOURS

By JOHN F. RUNCIMAN

### I

**D**URING the year 1914 Mr. Scriabine came from Russia to tell and show our English musicians how things should be done; and he gratified the fervent interviewer and sent him not empty away. On the contrary he provided him with many yards of copy by talking a great deal of fascinating moonshine about the relation of music to colour and the connection between perfumes and music. Let no one mock him. Any man, native or foreign, who provides a fad for faddists renders humanity a conspicuous service; for your faddist whose mental pockets are empty readily becomes a danger to society. He may take to theosophy, or Bacon-is-Shakespeare, and is as like as not to end by breaking the Sabbath. No harm is done by the conversion of a few visionaries to the belief that "through music and colour, with the aid of perfume, the human mind or soul can be lifted outside or above merely physical sensations into the region of purely abstract ecstasy and purely intellectual speculation" (Mr. Scriabine's words as reported). Moonshine is generally harmless and sometimes beautiful. It is a pity it should be closely associated with the word lunacy—perhaps because a solid meal cannot be made off it, and those who try it as provender are apt to become light-headed. Mr. Scriabine admits that in his speculations he relies wholly on his intuitions, science as yet having uttered no word; but "some scientists" somewhere "in Russia" are hard at work and staggering announcements may be expected at any moment. While anxiously awaiting these, we have Mr. Scriabine's speculations and his music.

He somewhat scornfully repudiates the suggestion that he is a futurist. Well, his perfumes by any other name would smell as sweet; but if he objects to being classed with Stravinsky, Schön-

berg, Marinetti, Pratella, and the few others who constitute the futurist "school," he must procure a new set of views and devise a new mode of expounding them, and he must learn to compose a very different kind of music from the latest manifestations of what it pleases his admirers to call his creative genius. His theories may not be Futurism, but in essentials they coincide with futurism; his music may not be futurist, but in most respects it cannot be distinguished from music which is avowedly futurist. It shows the same desperate struggle after originality and the same impotence of the creative faculty; like Schönberg's and Stravinsky's at least, it reveals a really consummate mastery over the technical devices and resources of the mighty men of old time and of the less mighty men of today; in the matter supposed to inspire it, the "programme," the "story," or the "philosophy" we cannot but observe a curious and quaint intellectual vacuity and naïveté; we perceive that a pretentious self-complacency is the force that enables the composer to plan and finish each work.

In this article I wish to deal more especially with Scriabine and his theories about combinations of sounds, odours and colours; but it will serve to clear the ground if first I devote a little space to some of this new music with which I am familiar and have listened to carefully. One must start with the "programme." Mr. Scriabine proclaims himself a theosophist and he claims to have put his theosophy into his music. Now, I regard theosophists as belonging to the same tribe as the discoverers of perpetual motion—whose machines would be perfect if only they would work; yet it is undeniable that some of these people are deeply moved by their strange creed. Doubtless Mr. Scriabine is quite sincere; but I find small sign of his faith in his "programmes" and smaller signs still in his music. In bygone days the programme was of no great moment. Beethoven, we know, always "worked to a story," and perhaps it is as well so few of the stories have been recorded. When a man is a composer pure and simple, only the music counts (if he is a master of operas or music-dramas the story counts equally). In dealing with this latest kind of music, however, when we find the music itself, at first at any rate, incomprehensible, we are driven to look up the composer's principles, opinions, programmes, if only to discover what he would be at and thus avoid misjudging him. It would be absurd to blame Scriabine for not succeeding in writing a symphony of the Beethoven type (say on the clear model of No. 3 or No. 5) when he aimed at no such thing.

Such music as "Prometheus; the Poem of Fire" being anything rather than self-explanatory, we look to see what the

composer has to say about it. We promptly learn that the title is an utter misnomer. There is no Prometheus in the piece: it is "Hamlet," as Artemus Ward said, "without Othello." The "fire" is "spiritual"—and that is all. This may be theosophy—far be it from us to say it is not; or it may be any other "osophy," but it is extremely childish, and would add nothing to the enlightenment of a young men's Bible-class. Such of Beethoven's programmes as we know are childish enough, too; but they deal with primary, elemental, the essential and fundamental things, emotions common to all humanity; and Beethoven made no parade of preaching a new evangel. Scriabine puts himself in line with the futurists by giving us a lot of pretentious comment on his work—stuff which, without malice or any wish to pre-judge him, I can only call pompous rubbish. He is not content to be composer: he must needs be prophet as well. Further, he is with the futurists in refusing to be content with the musician's medium of expression: besides music he must have colours, and in another work he means to offer us smells. With no scientific acquirements he has made or got possession of a colour-piano, a "clavier à lumière," and he claims to have written this "Prometheus" in such marvellous wise that two symphonies run concurrently (like a convict's sentence—only we, the listeners, are to undergo the double chastisement), the sound-symphony and the colour-symphony. That, I will soon try to show, means he has written for an instrument which no one has learnt to tune. A deaf man with fifty pipes picked at random from the debris of an old organ could build as rational and artistic an instrument as Scriabine's "clavier à lumière." Had not other futurists asked us to accept and find an artistic joy in much more preposterous inventions we might call this futurism run mad. "Prometheus" has been heard without the accompaniment of the "colour-symphony": I wonder what would happen if the colour-symphony were tried without an orchestra.

## II

It is easy enough to poke fun at these ambitious super-musicians. I might suggest, for instance, that, instead of one instrument showing variously coloured lights and another emitting varied perfumes, a much surer and more economical plan of raising an audience to the required state of "ecstatic contemplation" would be to insist on each seat-holder taking a dose of opium on entering the hall—though it would be sad if our Queen's Hall were

raided by the police as a drug-den. This sort of banter is cheap; but Marinetti and Pratella invite it; so long as they claim so much and offer so little they can expect nothing but ridicule. But Scriabine, Stravinsky and Schönberg deserve and shall have a different kind of treatment. I admit that their latest experiments provoke me to mirth; but my laughter is at any rate entirely good-natured; I am not merely tolerant but anxious to be enlightened; and if the laugh should some day turn against me I shall willingly join in. In their earlier essays, in what we ordinarily call "music" all three have proved themselves competent craftsmen. All claim to possess a sense of beauty, and by his "borrowings" Scriabine shows a sensitive appreciation of what is beautiful in the music of the older masters. The aim of them all is high. They aim no lower than at raising us for moments to the spiritual plane on which dwelt Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. To raise us for moments—that is the most the greatest poets and musicians of old time could do; and no worthier ambition could inspire, spur and whip up the genius of a poet or musician of today. But the ambition, the will, to do the thing is one matter; to live on that elevated plane, to breathe that diviner air, to have at command the means, (apart from purely technical means,) of raising us—these are different matters altogether. Granted the high aim, can we grant these composers the power of attaining it? Do they live in a remote region, hardly attainable by work-a-day mortals? Have they devised or evolved a medium to communicate their living dreams? Frankly, I cannot understand a page of Schönberg's later exploits. He declares they depict this, that and the other, and it is not for me to say they do not. A page of Chinese may be magnificent poetry; but I do not understand Chinese. I might take the word of a competent scholar that it is magnificent poetry. But, while I cannot understand Schönberg's Chinese, neither can I find the competent scholar to give any assurance regarding it. Not a single musician whose opinion carries any weight with me comprehends it any better than I do myself. Schönberg alone professes to understand it; he alone declares it to be magnificent music. I turn from his unintelligible cacophony to his "explanation" and find myself at once in familiar territory. There we have the platitudinous pomposity, the rhetorical, empty phrases, that we have learnt to be characteristic of the futurist. It may be that Schönberg writes music like an angel and writes prose like Poor Poll; and we are in the unfortunate position of not being able to grasp or feel the music and of having before us the Poor Poll prose, all too intelligible. The programmes leave one with the impression

of a fundamentally commonplace intelligence; the exposition of his artistic principles amounts only to an invitation to all the world to believe that everything Schönberg says is beautiful and expressive therefore *is* beautiful and expressive. That gets us "no further": despite the man's musicianship and praiseworthy intention we cannot admit any of his advanced work to be art at all. This is not to say he is a charlatan: it is simply to say that we cannot recognise as a great composer a man whose work we cannot as yet admit to be music.

The bulk of Scriabine's music is far from being unintelligible. His piano compositions are Chopin diluted with Henselt and water, and slightly flavoured at times with Russian folk-tune. He is one of the most generous borrowers time has brought forth. While he was playing I could have thought at moments that he had unearthed some unpublished work of Chopin and was trying a practical joke on us. But always the cold, tasteless water broke in and the illusion was destroyed. It is neat, slight music, totally uninspired, but graceful. It is evident that when Scriabine wrote it he was playing with music as with a toy. He had mastered notes and could amuse himself with them; but it had not occurred to him to use the toy for any high and noble purpose. If he had had it in him, the determination to do so might have served him as well as Beethoven was served by *his* determination—"today I take a new road." Beethoven had the root of the matter in him and the world got the "Eroica" symphony: in Scriabine's case we have the "Prometheus." This also contains a good many loans, the chief creditors being Beethoven and Chopin. The design of the work is copied from Beethoven: it is Beethoven purposely, deliberately warped and pulled askew. The themes are in outline either Beethovenish or Chopinesque; but by the application of a novel harmonic system they are somewhat disguised, and incidentally most of the colour and all the expressiveness are bleached out of them. As for Scriabine's power of developing his themes, I have already indicated that I should not dream of blaming him for not attempting to rival Beethoven. Just as he has twisted the Beethoven design for the purpose of following his programme, so he has developed his themes, not with a view of unfolding their musical possibilities but of following his programme, telling his story. Well, the story is not worth the telling; and the music as music is not, to speak frankly, worth the trouble of writing. The novel harmonies lose their novelty when one looks carefully at them. They are very ordinary harmonies with accidentals thrown in arbitrarily to make them sound extraordinary. They sound

extraordinary at first and make us prick up our ears; but presently we find the same recipe applied to all the chords our old friends the greater masters used, and the trick soon palls.

Stravinsky is a born writer of ballet-dances. He has come before the world with no very tremendous achievements. "The Sacrifice of Spring" is simply an elaborated accompaniment for the movements of Russian dancers. "Fireworks" is an attempt to paint in tones a picture of a pyrotechnic display; and all I have to say about it is that to my mind it might represent any other subject or scene one can think of. I take it, therefore, that either the composer meant it as an accompaniment to an actual display, or that he had the display so vividly in his fancy as to forget to provide a means of making it present to the fancy of his listeners. Like Scriabine's, his discords sound extraordinary at first, but, also as in Scriabine's case, the novelty soon palls. When Monteverde introduced the unprepared dominant seventh it was greeted with derision as harsh, ear-splitting, ugly and inartistic. Then the younger musicians grew to admire it and to imitate it, and they used it to death, thinking themselves very fine, original, modern and up-to-date fellows indeed. Nowadays, as I need scarcely remind my readers, it is a commonplace; and most of the works of Monteverde's 17th century imitators have perished—those, that is, who depended on "daring" harmony alone. This provides a lesson for futurists and all other composers: mere harmony alone cannot secure immortality for a work: the underlying idea, the emotion expressed, the design, and above all, the melody—to these alone can a composer safely trust. Stravinsky has melody, and so has Scriabine, but they have adopted new and arbitrary scales for the sake of the resulting harmonies; and our European ears do not take kindly to them. A deadly fear of being considered unoriginal prevents composers from inventing new, spontaneous, expressive tunes; and not all the effects of harmony and orchestration ever thought of can compensate, if these are wanting. Scriabine's orchestration and Stravinsky's are both in the highest degree brilliant, and often startling; but here again we must remember that the brilliance of today may sound dull and tame tomorrow, and reliance may not be set on it.

### III

Let us now consider Mr. Scriabine's colour-organ. In his speculations about the relations of colours and tones he shows himself more than a little behind the times. Or perhaps his futurism

leads him in thought so far ahead that he considers all the discussions, conjectures and "discoveries" of the past thirty years as out of date and negligible. Anyhow, it is about a quarter of a century since some not particularly striking results were obtained by interrogating blind people about the very problem which Mr. Scriabine now claims to have solved by his unaided intuition. At first sight it would seem that the subjects or victims of our English scientists' experiments could not be objected to on the ground of prejudice or prepossession as far as colours were concerned—being blind they had never seen any colours. A person who had seen as well as heard a trumpet might associate the tone with a greenish or yellow or coppery hue, according to the value of the instrument he had seen played. Naturally a blind man could have no such association. One blind man said at once that the trumpet tone corresponded to what he imagined was scarlet; and I remember—rather mistily, it is true—how the low notes of the flute were compared to violet or dark blue, some other sound to pure white, and so on. What was the scientific value of these questionings and experiments, what the result of the interminable arguments that followed? As I have hinted, very little.

All the blind subjects could read; and many had evidently read a great deal. Their choice of colours seemed to me in every case due to an act of memory, determined by the most casual and random associations of ideas formed in the course of discursive reading. We have no notion, and have no means of acquiring any notion of what the word scarlet conveys to the mind of a blind man; but this we do know: that everyone, blind or clear-sighted, can learn from books that scarlet is a striking colour, one that arrests immediate attention, and undeniably the shrill note of a trumpet is striking and possesses the valuable if sometimes disconcerting power of attracting immediate attention. Scarlet for the trumpet, violet for the low tones of the flute—these were, it must be conceded, two lucky hits; but they came from books or conversational intercourse with people who could both see and hear. It is of greater importance to note that they establish no fixed, unvarying relationship, or any relationship whatever, between colour and sound; they afford no hint, not even the vaguest, as to a definite ratio existing between the ether-vibrations which reach our eyes, and through our eyes our brains, as scarlet, and the atmospheric vibrations which through the ear reach our brain as trumpet-tone. Not only did they fail to afford a hint: they could not do so. Mr. Scriabine is exceedingly reticent about the methods and aims, as well as about the names, of his "scientists" somewhere "in Russia"; but



it is only fair to assume that the aim is to determine some such ratios. If a means can be found of producing upon the brain, by colour through intermediation of the eye, a precisely analogical effect to that which is produced by sounds through the medium of the ear; if these means can be registered and the action set down in terms of cold arithmetic, so that a *clavier à lumière* can be tuned as accurately as a piano—then indeed it will be time to begin rhapsodising about colour-symphonies: then, but not till then. But I fear the “scientists” are as yet far from this goal; I fear that when they get their lists of vibrations of, say, the different shades which may form the scale of Red, and begin the work of finding the correspondence of these with the vibrations that form the scale of G on an oboe and the same and other scales on other instruments—I fear they will promptly find themselves landed in a quagmire of surds and decimals that recur to all eternity.

#### IV

If the problem of Tones-Colours seems not only difficult, but impossible, of solution, what on earth are we to think about the problem Tones-Colours-Perfumes? Granted that a symphony consisted of these three elements, or rather, to use Scriabine’s phrase, three symphonies running concurrently, one made up of combinations of sounds (or noises), another of combinations of coloured lights, another of combinations of smells, is there the slightest ground for assuming that *any* combination of odours can make an appeal to the aesthetic faculty in us? One virtue odours possess, that of recalling by association past experiences. The smell of a rose may remind of some garden of long ago: it may call up vividly before the mind’s eye some incident that occurred long ago. In my case, for example, it immediately recalls a scene of no interest to anyone else and of no particular interest to me. One summer evening after a day of rain a gardener showed a party over a rose-garden and we passed through a courtyard where the storm had played havoc with the flowers. The air was hot, close and damp; the wet cobble-stones were scattered with blown petals; the bushes in the centre plot and all round the walls were hung with battered, miserable leaves, still dripping with raindrops. From the courtyard we passed into a hot-house where for the first time I saw cucumbers growing, and so out into another rose-garden. This happened when I was a child, many years ago; and now, when I smell a rose, I have an immediate vision of—roses? No: of cucumbers growing under glass! Other associations I have; but

none so strong as that. Let me give another instance. The “perfume” of tar is not, I should think, in great favour with fashionable ladies, nor for the thing itself have I any mighty fancy. Yet it reminds me of the banks of the Tyne on sweet evenings, an old-fashioned seaport before iron ships had entirely ousted the old sailing ships, and sailors used to tar their wooden craft while the tide was out, and the litter of the ropes, chains, canvas and timber suggested only romance to the boyish imagination. My case is not rare. Everyone to whom I have ever spoken on the subject had his or her particular association with a particular odour or smell; but the visions evoked were never alike and each person had a favourite smell. It might be that of a farm-yard, it might be a pine-forest or the sea. The reader will see whither I am leading. The æsthetic value of a smell—if æsthetic it can be called—is purely arbitrary; and the messages sent through the nostril to the brain, or the thoughts and emotions aroused in the brain by any one odour, are not the same in any two cases. If they were, or ever had been, music would never have been invented.

*Ton-klang*, then, can be counted upon in an art; arbitrary arrangements of coloured lights—quite a different matter from the art of painting—cannot, to say the least, be depended upon to produce the same or even analogous effects on various minds; and odours are absolutely certain to produce widely different effects at which the composer of a “perfume symphony” has no means of making a faint guess. I do not trouble about the business of getting a succession of changing smells to a large audience. Whether attendants would syringe us at intervals, whether a sort of shower-bath on a huge scale could be arranged on the ceiling of a huge hall, whether a powerful engine would pump perfumes at us from the concert platform at the direction of the conductor—these matters do not concern me: the whole idea is preposterous, a dream, not, from the artistic point of view, worth the pains of trying to realise.

## V

I have already admitted that Scriabine, Schönberg and Stravinsky must be reckoned serious artists and competent craftsmen, and the fact of this being so, simply makes them greater puzzles, the harder to understand. We are driven to look at the question this way: that though serious, sincere, and able to write well in the manner of earlier masters, they lack the inner motive, spiritual force to create *something new*—new in the sense in which Bach’s,

Beethoven's and Wagner's music was and forever remains new—remains forever new in that each is the truthful, perfect and full expression of a unique personality. Their case is therefore almost tragic. To have at command the means of saying a new thing and to have the desire to say it, and yet to have nothing new to say—how could mortal be more unhappily endowed or have a sadder burden or fate laid upon him!

Now it may be replied that this opinion has been uttered about each of the great composers in turn and has always proved untrue. As a matter of fact this opinion has *not* been expressed about the composers now universally acknowledged as great. The opinion expressed about them has always been very different, namely, that they were not masters of the older technique, that they did not write like their predecessors because they could not. Wagner was told that he invented the music-drama because he could not express himself through the medium that sufficed Beethoven. Wagner did not invent the music-drama: he extended and developed the opera from the dimensions that suited Weber until he arrived at the form which suited himself; he never discarded the medium that sufficed Beethoven, but on the contrary he never employed any other: he broadened it and added something to it—exactly as Beethoven had done before him. He had something new to find a voice for, and it was the new thing bursting within his heart that made him slowly, tentatively, add to the Beethoven law, taking away not a tittle. He was a consummate master of the Beethoven technique and the charge against him was that he had not the craftsmanship of a schoolboy. Quite other is the charge to bring against Schönberg, Stravinsky and Scriabine. They know the older technique and in using it never have they shown a hint of originality. Whereas in Beethoven and Wagner we see the old style being developed and originality slowly creeping in, forced by the need for expression, our three moderns seem never to have felt any inner need at all. All three appear to have determined at a single step to change themselves from utterly commonplace to highly original musicians. We see no slowly growing new style; they have put on their new style as a man might put on a new suit of clothes. The later Schönberg, I own, passes my comprehension altogether; but the later Scriabine is simply the old man in a new suit—the man underneath remains fundamentally and entirely the same. And the proof is that their latest step is in logical succession to their first: to add colours and smells to their noises is only what we might have expected.

The desire to be original, startling, astonishing, at all costs is a symptom common to all the arts at the present day. To create an immediate sensation does not demand any really original thought and emotion: on the contrary, to ensure an immediate success, true and lasting originality is the thing you must most avoid. If you want to startle you must not ask people to think. Thinking takes time and requires mental effort: hence profound art only slowly comes to its own: prompt successes cannot be scored by it. No: what you have to consider is the form and manner of your way of presenting any matter you may have to present—the garb of your thought is the thing to reckon upon. In painting look at the Cubists, the Futurists and some of the Post-impressionists: they rely on the extraordinary, the incomprehensible, the gaudy and the *outré*. Read the Imagists and the mighty achievements of Mr. Ezra Pound—the trifling put in a grotesque shape that disguises its poverty. Look at many modern novels, each trying to beat its predecessor in uncouthness of phraseology and in nearness of approach to the improper. Look all round: everywhere you find men and women with but one object, that of attracting attention, and with but one way of trying to attain it, that of indulging in sheer extravagance and exaggeration. It is not surprising that musicians have caught the craze. But, to return to our muttons, granted that Scriabine and Stravinsky are simply trying to do in an honest way what the great composers have done, enlarge the boundaries of their art, can we concede for a moment that by adding colours and smells to what they call music they have taken the right road? Have they not simply closely followed the example of the painters who will paint, and of the poets who will write, anything that occurs to them, provided only that it has not been used before? The smelling machine has not yet been invented; the colour-organ cannot be tuned; yet here we have musicians in such haste to be hailed as great inventors that they will write for these engines—and trust to luck!

## VI

Some characteristics the big inventors, the real innovators, the extenders of territory, the “builders of the empire” of music have possessed in common, the principal being definiteness of aim and strength of purpose. ‘High-falutin’ they one and all abhorred. Sebastian Bach would say to his sons “let us go to [was it Dresden?] and hear their pretty Italian songs”—he felt no scorn

for them: he enjoyed them. Haydn was prosaic, bald, in describing his method of composition. Beethoven laughed at the raptures of his admirers. Dozens of young men took their resplendent scores to Wagner, only to be snubbed for their extravagance in using means beyond the necessities of the occasion. None of the great men would tolerate the vaporous, the windy, or like Mr. Scriabine indulge in moonshine. They knew the soul could only manifest itself through the body, and that if the body of music was spoken of at all it must be in plain, comprehensible terms. These were the men whose music is full of a lofty spiritual content; there is "ecstatic" contemplation, enough and to spare, in their work; but they knew precisely the shade and, so to speak, colour of emotion they wanted to express; and they went to work, just as they spoke, in the most direct fashion possible, recognizing the limitations as well as the powers of the medium, the body, through which the spirit had to manifest itself. Now take an exposition of ultra-modern views and intentions, from a very able article by Mr. Wallace L. Crowdy, in the "Musical Standard." He takes, as an analogy to that of the musicians, the case of an ultra-modern painter, Kandinsky. "Kandinsky," we are told, "is painting music. That is to say, he has broken down the barrier between music and painting, and has isolated the pure emotion, which, for want of a better name, we call artistic emotion." This, to me, is amazing. The "artistic emotion" is "isolated"—which means, if it means anything, that we have the soul without the body, the emotion, artistic or other, without any medium by which it can be conveyed. Mr. Crowdy says the musicians are aiming exactly at doing the same thing; and I submit that it cannot be done, need not be done, and should not be done; that the result of an attempt to do it can be no other than *the absolute negation of art*. I take my stand on this: that Art is beautiful form. It may be more than this—the great masters filled their beautiful form with a spiritual content—but it cannot be less. For we cannot have a content without a form to contain it. I employ the word form with no narrow academic meaning—I mean lines and spaces in pictures, melodies and harmonies in music, words and lines in poetry. According to the ultra-moderns' latest exponent, however, the spiritual content must be divorced from all these; and such an intention itself seems to me divorced from all sense. It is moonshine gone utterly lunatic.

The world is still beautiful, beautiful as it was in the far-off beginning of time; life is beautiful, too, and joyous, and sad, and gloomy and tragic and everlastingly strange; the heart of man is deep. Our human passions, our delights and griefs, our sense of

the unfathomable mystery of things, will continue to seek ever new expression in new forms. But music is the voice of man, and every stirring of the human soul, if it is expressed in music at all, must be expressed lyrically, in song; when music ceases to be song it ceases to be music. What Scriabine and Schönberg offer us is something that is not music, and is not in the proper sense of the word meant to be music. It may turn out to be better than music, but that is hardly conceivable so long as they are trying to make a kind of music (in the technical meaning of the word) which by a process of self-nullification gets rid of its own body.